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Victory in the Aleutians:
An Analysis of Jointlessness

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Mark C. Mohr

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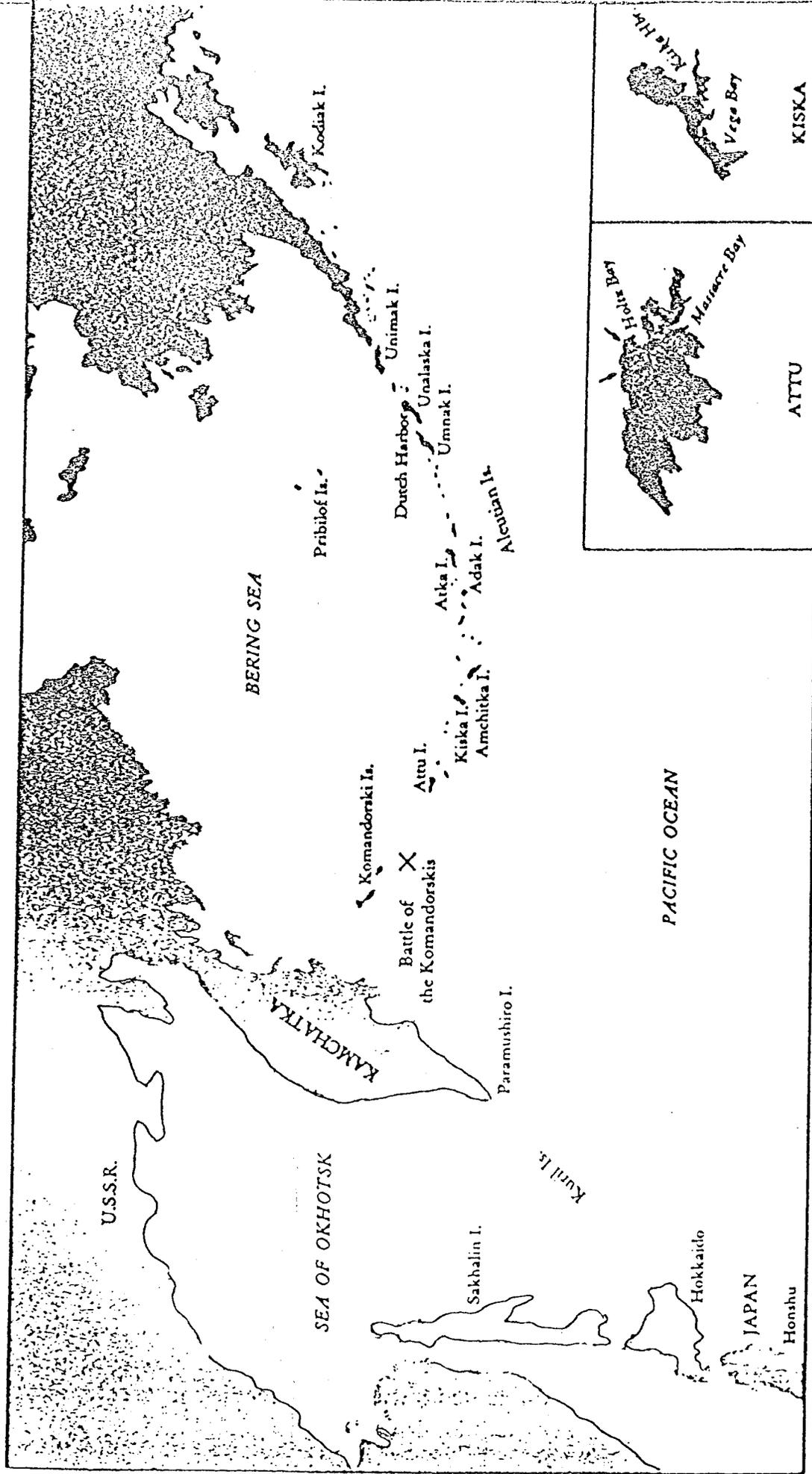
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Abstract

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The Aleutian Theater of Operations

VICTORY IN THE ALEUTIANS:
AN ANALYSIS OF JOINTLESSNESS

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of June 3rd and 4th 1942, attack aircraft from the Japanese carriers Junyo and Ryujo bombed the American base of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian islands. These actions, combined with the occupation on June 7th of Kiska and Attu islands by 2500 crack Japanese combat troops, resulted in a relatively unknown American joint operation to regain control of the Aleutian Island chain. As such, the Aleutian operation was the first truly joint operation of World War II. It involved all three branches of the armed services and preceded Guadalcanal by six months. It should be noted that this operation was also a coalition effort as it involved members of the Canadian armed forces. Additionally, it was the first Army amphibious operation of WWII. Occupation of Adak by U.S. Army troops in August 1942 preceded the Torch landings in North Africa by approximately two months. Americans were victorious in the Aleutians because the Japanese were overwhelmed by the relative sheer number of American troops involved in attrition tactics supported by an uninterrupted supply chain, not because of a highly synchronous and complementary effort by all commands involved.

The question must be asked, "Why analyze an American victory in what seems to be an obscure and unimportant area?" The answer, simply stated, is that even though this operation was of tertiary importance in a secondary theater of war, there are valuable lessons an operational commander can draw from the conflict. Examination of the Aleutian operation yields the fact that failure of commanders in an immature theater to properly integrate joint

forces led to a prolonged struggle and the second highest percentage of U.S. casualties for forces committed in the entire Second World War. Had the Japanese (who had intimate knowledge of their surroundings and a well dug-in defense network in impassable terrain) been resupplied with fresh troops and material, or been able to cut off American invasion forces from their logistics base, the result may have been significantly different.

STRATEGIC SETTING

A casual observer might question the logic behind the Japanese expenditure of men and resources to occupy several desolate, and seemingly useless islands in the middle of the North Pacific. The Japanese were compelled to control the Aleutians for several important reasons. They were in the process of expanding territory already conquered in the establishment of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity sphere. At the time of the Aleutian occupation, Japanese-held territory ran southward to the Gilberts, and westward through the Solomons to the Dutch East Indies. It then ran northward through Thailand and China. Establishment of a garrison and air base on Kiska and Attu would provide a buffer to the northern flank of the Japanese islands. It was widely believed among senior Imperial military leaders that the only location Doolittle's raid against Tokyo could have launched from was one in the Aleutians. Japanese aircraft based on these islands would have the ability to roam far south to discover American attack forces menacing the Kuriles and interdict the lend-lease supply route from Alaska to the Soviet Union. Additionally, by merely occupying the western Aleutians, the Americans were forced to commit troops and resources that were sorely needed elsewhere. There was intense political pressure to liberate occupied American soil caused by an almost paranoid fear that the Japanese were planning to invade the continental United States. It is unclear whether the Japanese had any

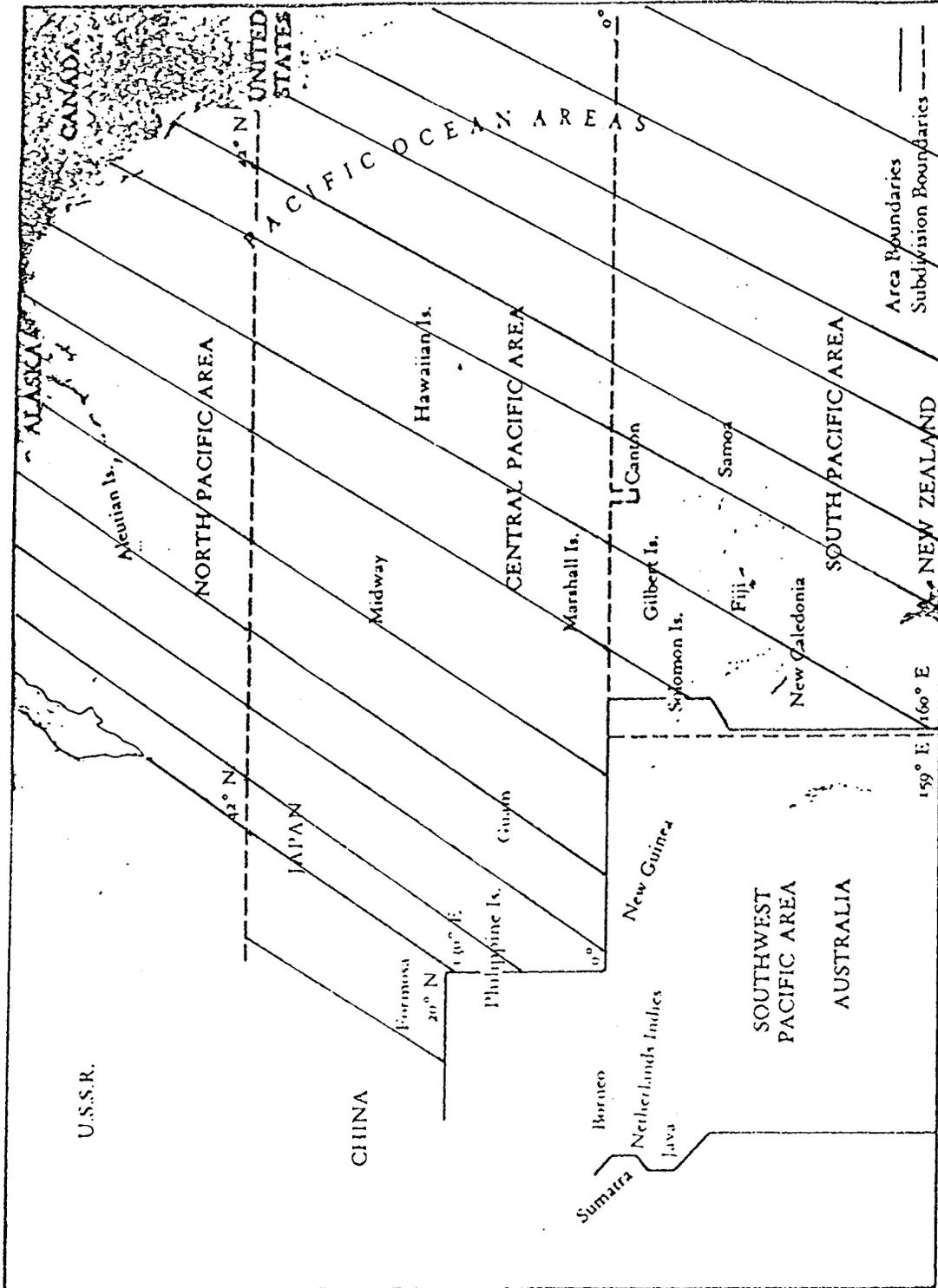


Figure 1

The Pacific Areas

BROKEN VERTICAL LINE IS SOUTH-SOUTHWEST PACIFIC BOUNDARY AS REVISED AUGUST 1, 1942

intention of attempting to mount an invasion of mainland Alaska or the West Coast of the U.S.. The overriding reason for sending a large Japanese naval force into the North Pacific was to engage and destroy the remnants of the American Pacific Fleet. "In the Aleutians, multiple task forces under stolid Vice Admiral Boshiro Hosogoya would strike a paralyzing blow at Dutch Harbor while an occupation group landed troops on the islands of Adak, Kiska and Attu. The operation would draw the American fleet out of hiding from Pearl Harbor; it would steam north toward Alaska, and Yamamoto would wait for it at Midway."¹

UNITY OF EFFORT

Joint Pub 0-2 states that, "Combatant commanders should ensure that their unified action synchronizes joint operations and single service operations in time, space, and purpose with the actions of supporting commands and other military forces."² If there is one vital lesson to be learned from the Aleutian campaign, it is that failure to achieve unity of effort, unified action and a unified command structure caused the operations to last much longer and cost many more casualties than necessary.

Admiral Nimitz, as Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Ocean Areas, was directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff among other tasks to: "Hold island positions between the United States and the Southwest Pacific area necessary for the security of the line of communications between these regions and for supporting naval, air, and amphibious operations against Japanese forces."³ The term "island positions," would obviously seem to include the Aleutian island chain. Figure 1 illustrates the region that Admiral Nimitz believed to be under his control.

In response to intelligence received at CINCPAC regarding the expected Japanese invasion, Admiral Nimitz issued operation order number 28-42 on May 21, 1942, in which he

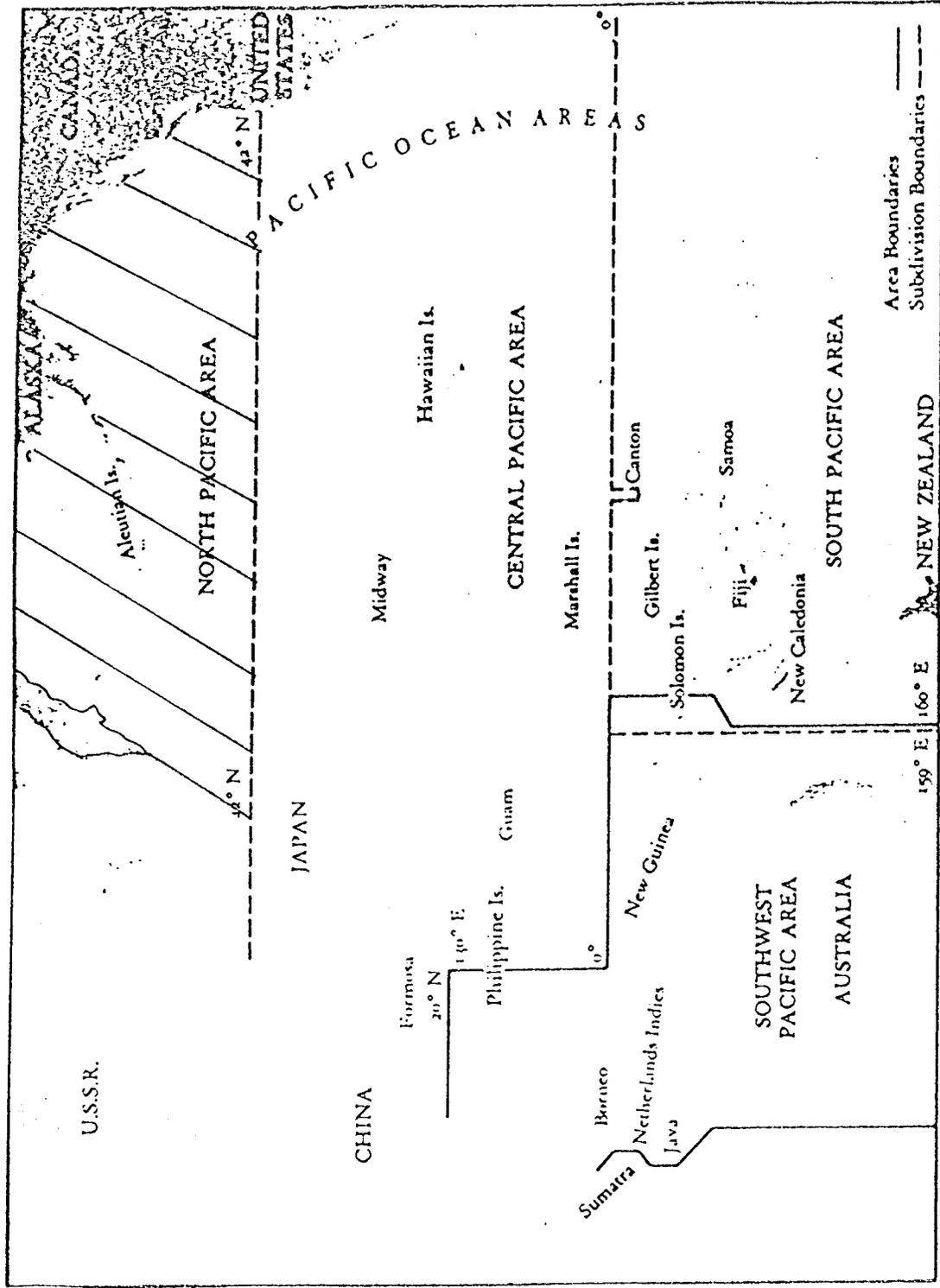


Figure 2

The Pacific Areas
 BROKEN VERTICAL LINE IS SOUTH-SOUTHWEST PACIFIC BOUNDARY AS REVISED AUGUST 1, 1942

activated CTF-8 and ordered Rear Admiral Robert A. Theobald, USN to, "Oppose the advance of the enemy in the Aleutian-Alaskan area, taking advantage of every favorable opportunity to inflict strong attrition, and be governed by the principle of calculated risk."⁴

By simply examining both his and CINCPAC's orders, it is understandable that Admiral Theobald assumed that he was the joint force commander for the Aleutians, and that the Army and Army Air Corp would be supporting commanders, supplying forces as necessary.

Figure 2 illustrates the area that Admiral Theobald believed to be his operational responsibility. The dispatch issued by the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. fleet (COMINCH), and the Chiefs of Staffs of the Army informing all subordinates, "That area boundaries should in no way be interpreted as restricting movements on operations which might aid the common cause,"⁵ would seemingly only reinforce this belief. Things would develop differently.

Upon reaching the North Pacific with his nine-ship task force, a meeting took place at the Kodiak Naval Base between Admiral Theobald and Major General Simon Buckner. The conference quickly crumbled due to a clash of personalities, demonstrated by the two men shouting at one another. Both officers tried to push the interests of his service to the front of the agenda, while refusing to cooperate in the least, let alone become subservient to the other. Rear Admiral Theobald logically asked Admiral Nimitz for clarification of the command roles. The response was of little help. "The command relationship between ... Alaska Defense Command under General Buckner and the North Pacific Force is to be by mutual cooperation."⁶ Personalities were such that progress would not be made in the Aleutians by cooperation alone. In effect, the JCS was in operational control and the two component commands would be left to prosecute the campaign in their own fashion and independently. This fact is exemplified by

Aleutian Command

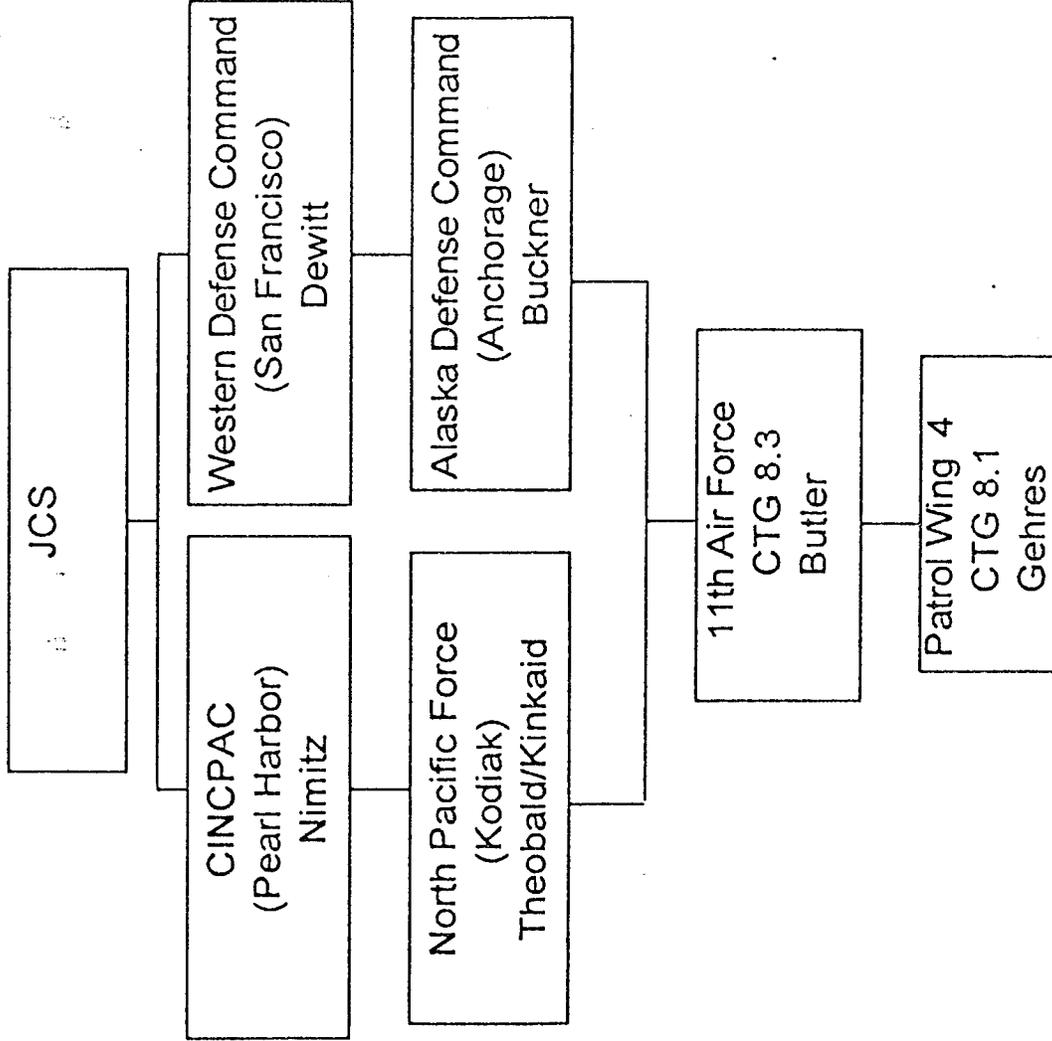


Figure 3

Admiral Nimitz's request from JCS to invade Attu and Kiska. He had sent Admiral Spruance to attend the March, 1942 Pacific Military Conference, where the division of U.S. forces between the European and Pacific theaters would be decided. "Nimitz instructed Spruance to secure approval from the Joint Chiefs for the recapture of Attu and Kiska."⁷ Figure 3 illustrates the Aleutian command relationship.

Navy

"The Navy (Theobald and Nimitz) wanted to contain Japan and convince Tojo and Yamamoto that America could and would defend herself."⁸ Rear Admiral Theobald chose to harass the Japanese forces occupying Kiska and Attu with naval gunfire, while attempting to interdict convoys resupplying the islands. Failure to coordinate actions with the other services would not be Theobald's only shortcoming. He did not believe the intelligence initially given to him by CINCPAC, however Admiral Nimitz could have aided the unity of effort by divulging the source of his information. Admiral Theobald formulated his own estimate of the situation and chose not to dedicate the bulk of his forces in the defense of Dutch Harbor. Despite Admiral Nimitz's specific orders to oppose the Japanese and inflict strong attrition, Theobald chose to station his submarines and patrol boats on picket stations spanning the length of the Aleutian islands supported by sector-patrolling catalina flying boats. This perhaps would not have been a bad strategy if those were the only assets available, or if the Americans did not have reasonably good intelligence about the Japanese intentions. Rear Admiral Theobald, fearing the Japanese carriers, chose not to imperil his cruisers and destroyers. He positioned them in the gulf, 500 miles east of Dutch Harbor, where they would be covered by aircraft flying out of Kodiak island. He publicly stated that he had no intention of imperiling his ships to Japanese

carriers. Believing this fight primarily a Navy one, and finding no compromises with his counterpart, Theobald put to sea aboard his flagship USS Indianapolis and maintained complete radio silence. Attempting to bombard Kiska on July 27th, after waiting five days for impossibly thick fog to lift, 4 ships of Theobald's task force rammed one another, damaging a third of the force. After being reprimanded by CINCPAC for putting to sea when he should be at headquarters forwarding developments as they occurred, Theobald returned to Kodiak and left Rear Admiral "Poco" Smith in command of the remaining ships. On August 3rd, Admiral Smith's force made an ineffective bombardment of Kiska, hampered by weather and dangerous reefs in poorly chartered waters. Because of the strategic importance of the Guadalcanal operation that was to begin shortly, NORPACFOR was stripped of much of its offensive power - nine ships, four submarines and a squadron of PBYS were taken. Admiral Theobald was limited to convoy duty and insignificant harassment of the enemy. One important fact stands out: During his tenure as NORPACFOR, Rear Admiral Theobald did not forward one invasion plan for consideration.

Army

The Alaskan Defense Command had its own ideas about how to prosecute the Aleutian campaign. "The Army (Buckner, Dewitt, Marshall) wanted to push the enemy out of the Aleutians, use the islands for steppingstones, and have a crack at the Japanese on their own soil."⁹ It is somewhat understandable that General Buckner of the ADC felt that prosecution of the Aleutian campaign belonged to him. His command, a component of the Western Defense Command in San Francisco, was charged with preparing the territory of Alaska for the possibility of war against Japan. When General Buckner initially received his orders in 1940,

he only had 800 troops of the 4th Infantry Regiment and no aircraft to speak of. In the next two years he built the necessary infrastructure of garrisons, airfields, communications, and supply lines from scratch. It is important to note that late in 1940 General Buckner had commanded a Navy patrol craft to personally reconnoiter the Aleutian islands to find locations suitable for the construction of landing fields. Up to the beginning of hostilities, General Buckner assumed the Aleutians were his responsibility because no one told him specifically they weren't.

Figure 4 illustrates the area General Buckner believed to be his AOR. The area of confusion, caused by both Admiral Theobald's and General Buckner's belief that they had operational control of the Aleutians, is illustrated in Figure 5. Prosecution against the Japanese may have proceeded more rapidly if General Buckner established a working relationship with Admiral Theobald as well as he had with the Navy's Alaskan sector commander. "In appreciation of Buckner's fearless leadership of the joint prewar Aleutian survey, the Navy's Captain Parker formally presented him with a commission as a 'Brevet Brigadier Admiral.' For a time, the two commander's friendship made for easy inter-service relations in the Alaska theater."¹⁰ Even though bickering continued to dominate the Army-Navy relationship, General Buckner threw himself behind building the defenses of Alaska from Juneau to Nome. He also was very supportive in the efforts that led to his 4500 men of the 4th Infantry Regiment occupation of Adak of August 30th. He remained steadfast in helping any offensive operations against the Japanese, and this was indeed true, right through to the Kiska and Attu invasions.

Air Force

The Army Air Corp bombers and Navy patrol planes bore the brunt of the fighting from the time of Dutch Harbor up to the Kiska operation of May 11, 1943. They did so however,

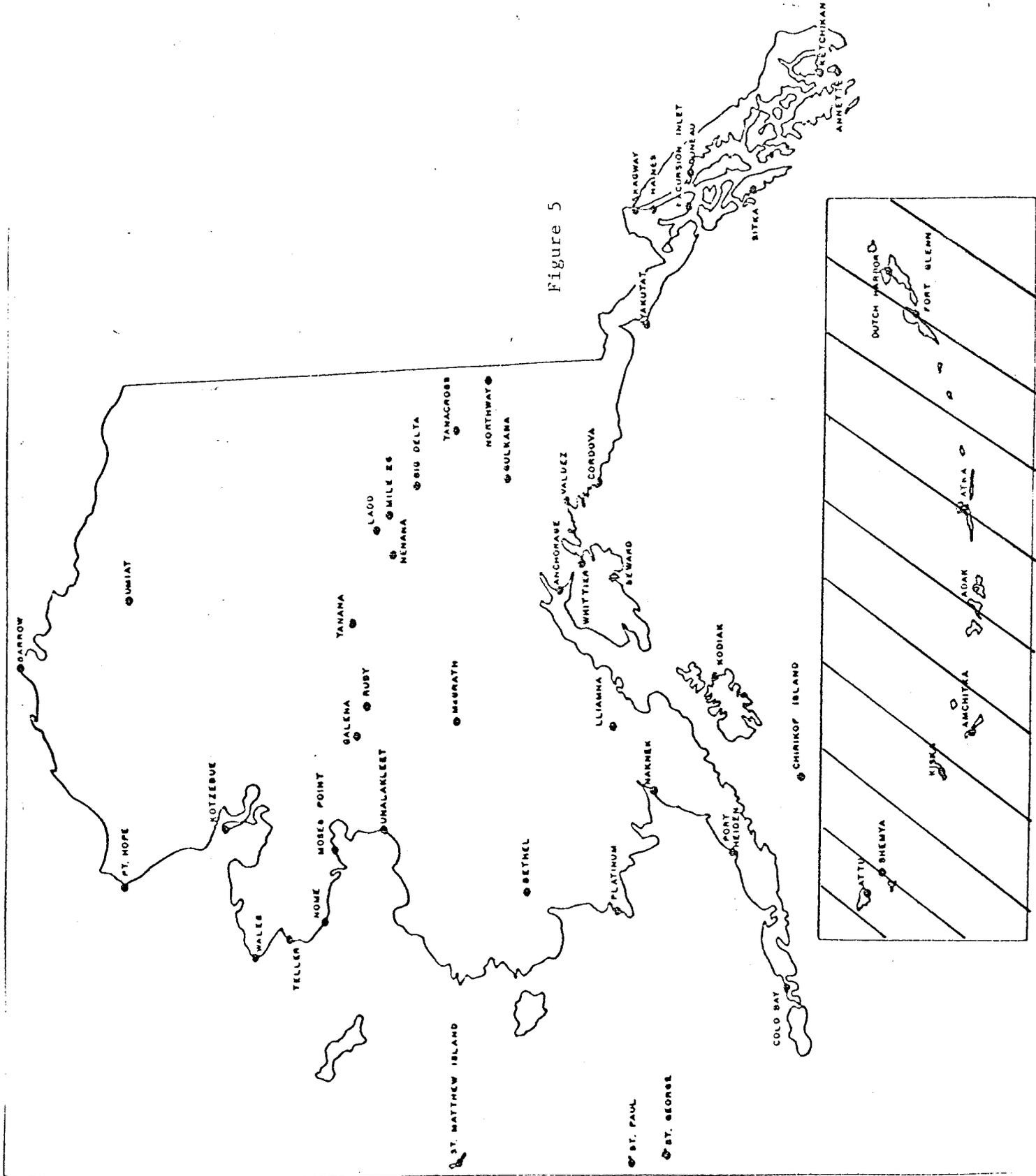


Figure 5

in a largely independent and uncoordinated manner. They had their own ideas of how to defeat the Japanese in the northern Pacific. "The Air Force (Eareckson, Davis, Butler, and Hap Arnold) wanted to plaster the enemy on Kiska from the air. Beyond patriotic considerations, they wanted to prove the effectiveness of attrition bombardment as a strategic weapon."¹¹ Even though Admiral Theobald's authority extended over all Navy, Canadian and U.S. Air Forces in Alaska, the integration and coordination was less than ideal. In Admiral Nimitz's operation plan 28-42, all Air Forces (including the Navy's Patrol Wing Four, operating the Alaskan Sector PBY-5A's) reported to the 11th Air Force. When Admiral Theobald arrived at Kodiak, he divided his air components. The Navy patrol aircraft would form T.G. 8.1 under Captain L.E. Gehres, the air search group commander. The 11th Air Force would form T.G. 8.3 under Brigadier General Butler, the Air Striking Group commander. Any unity of effort that was enabled by unity of command under Admiral Nimitz's operation plan, had been dismantled.

Another example of the failure in joint cooperation was the failure to get the Air Force in step behind its explicit commander. This was also a failure of Admiral Theobald to act forcefully down his chain of command. The dispute erupted shortly after Admiral Theobald arrived in Kodiak and stated he wished to base the entire 11th Air Force at Umnak and Cold Bay, where they would have a shorter transit time to strike the Japanese. General Butler (CTG 8.3), fearing his aircraft would be vulnerable due to lack of revetments and early warning systems, offered to forward base only 60% of his aircraft. When later asked, why he simply did not order the 11th Air Force to move forward (as was within his power as CTF-8) Rear Admiral Theobald stated that "Should severe losses result from such action, irreparable harm

would have been done to the future Navy, Army, and Army Air Force cooperation, not only in Alaska, but also in all other theaters of operation, where similar cooperation might be required in the days ahead."¹²

This failure to integrate at the command level does not diminish the heroism displayed by the average airman who daily flew thousands of miles unescorted, in the worst possible weather imaginable, to deliver bombs over Attu and Kiska. The aircrew of CTF-8 deserve a large measure of credit for impeding the Japanese construction plans on the islands, as well as interdicting a large portion of their shipping destined for resupplying their garrisons. It should be noted that the 11th Air Force suffered the highest percentage of losses of any numbered Air Force in World War II.

JOINT TRAINING

The inter-service training that American forces took part in for the Aleutian campaign might be best characterized as "learned and relearned." It is logical to assume that because of the severity of the region's weather, as well as the cooperation needed between the services (highlighted by its amphibious nature), realistic and repeated training evolutions would receive high priority. JCS Pub 1 states that "The role of training and education is indispensable to effective command. We fight as we train and exercise. The skills of our leaders rest in large part on the quality of their military training and education."¹³ General Buckner understood the importance of military training and began an intensive program for the 4th Infantry Regiment as soon as they arrived in Alaska. It was the 4000 men of this unit, under Brigadier General Landrum, who occupied Adak on August 30, 1942. By occupying Adak, the U.S. could build a runway and logistics base within 250 miles striking distance of Kiska. The U.S. Army Forces

were put ashore from Navy transports, covered by Canadian and American cruisers and destroyers. The 11th Air Force had been designated to provide air cover but was delayed by an intense storm until after forces were ashore. This same storm made landings treacherous, piling barges up on the beach and sending large amounts of supplies to the bottom. Once ashore, the tundra-turned mud made mechanized movements very difficult.

The lessons from the Adak occupation could have proved valuable to American forces in 1943. When the invasion of Kiska was planned for May, 1943, elements from the 7th Infantry Division were chosen. These units had been readying for action in North Africa by training in the American desert. The 7th Division had also been training as a mechanized force but the Adak occupation had showed the futility of such movements.

The 4th Infantry Division, which many would say should have spearheaded the invasion based on their previous Alaskan experience, were to be kept in reserve on Adak. However there were several positive aspects to the 7th's training program. It trained together an additional three months at Fort Ord in California under the tutelage of Marine General Holland "Howlin' Mad" Smith, USMC, CINCPAC's amphibious commander. In addition, a group of officers from the ADC were sent to the Hour Glass Division to advise them on the unique problems it would face in the Aleutians. Several negative aspects also highlighted their training program. Hardly any of the men of the 7th Division had any previous Alaskan experience or familiarity with the type of harsh conditions or terrain in which they would soon find themselves. During the practice amphibious landings that the division carried out, only simulated unloading of supplies and support vehicles was executed. This would have grave consequences during the actual invasion. Additionally, Air Force elements took virtually no part in the training efforts

of the 7th Division since all Air Force assets were already in-theater prosecuting the air operation against Attu and Kiska. Close air support between the invasion forces and air force could have been coordinated during the three month training period at Fort Ord.

THE JOINT INVASION

On May 11, 1943 the 10,000 man strong 7th Infantry Division took to the beaches of Attu covered by a large American striking fleet. The attack was two-pronged. The Northern force, led by Colonel Frank L. Culin, landed at Holtz Bay. The Southern force, led by Colonel Edward P. Earle, landed at Massacre Bay. After a slow advance through the wet and cold Aleutian muskeg, fighting a stubborn defender that gave ground only grudgingly, the two forces linked up at Jarmin Pass on May 17th. The Japanese were annihilated trying to break out of Chichagof Valley and by May 30th the operation was over. The counted Japanese dead were 2351 while the Landing Force Attu suffered 3829 casualties.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

It took JCS and CINPAC six months after the Japanese invasion of Attu and Kiska to improve the command and control situation. It was greatly improved when Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid relieved Rear Admiral Theobald as NORPACFOR. He was also appointed as JTF with orders to clear the Japanese out of the Aleutians. Even though joint command in the theater would still be by mutual cooperation with the Army, the relationship improved immediately. This was demonstrated when both General Buckner and Admiral Kinkaid ordered the Army, Navy and Air Force headquarters moved to Adak, 1000 miles closer to the enemy. They began retaking the Aleutians by landing the 2500 man, 4th Infantry Regiment on Amchitka

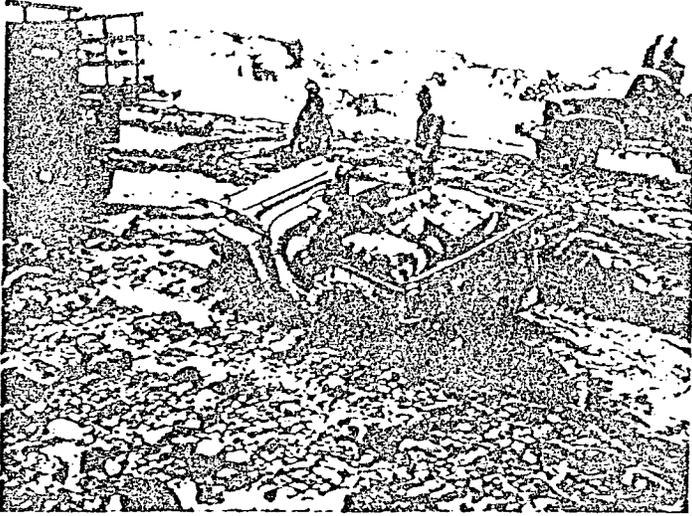
on January 11, 1943. Plans were then laid for the Attu and Kiska invasions. Another example of how the command relationship solidified was demonstrated by the ability of Admiral Kinkaid to relieve General Brown as landing force commander when it was perceived that he was not being sufficiently aggressive in pursuing ground objectives on Attu. It should be noted that General Brown's relief was largely pushed by General Dewitt (Western Defense Command), who had promised the War Department victory on Attu in three days. There were however, several examples of how the command and control relationship was flawed. Admiral Kinkaid remained on Adak during the Attu invasion, which made real-time reporting almost impossible. The two invasion forces, attacking from the north and south, had no means to communicate with one another; making linkup extremely difficult. General Brown's communication with Rear Admiral Rockwell (the Naval Force Commander), was extremely limited by the Aleutian weather. Written notes sent by personal courier were lost enroute. This delayed timely deployment of the operational reserve force from Adak. General Brown had no way of knowing the status of his reinforcements and supplies.

Additionally, the close air support coordination was imperfect. Even though the invasion plan had been distributed to all aviation units, there were still ground units being strafed by friendly aircraft. It took a direct tasking by Admiral Kinkaid to Colonel Eareckson (Aleutian Bomber Command) as coordinator of all air operations to alleviate the problem.

JOINT LOGISTICS/INTELLIGENCE

There were several failures in both joint logistics and intelligence which greatly increased the cost of capturing Attu and Kiska islands. The 4th Infantry Regiment had occupied Amchitka island in January of 1943. This action would yield many valuable lessons regarding the

40. Soldiers drag a Jeep out of Amchitka mud.



53. Ankle deep in muck, Sergeant George F. Cova hauls supplies to the front line.

61. Brigadier General Archibald Arnold's artillerymen drag a 37-mm gun forward where tractors cannot go.



harshness of weather and how it affected ground operations and supply movement. Some of these lessons were communicated to the 7th Infantry Division which was training for the Attu invasion in desert gear. If these lessons had been evaluated, perhaps the ground forces would not have suffered 1200 severe cold injuries. Also, the Adak and Amchitka operations should have yielded information that would have prevented the supply bottleneck and troop movement difficulties caused by the muskeg (spongy tundra). The throughput of supplies to the combat forces was totally inadequate. Most supplies remained at sea aboard vulnerable merchant ships because the beaches were clogged with immovable provisions. Supplies were moved to the front on the backs of couriers because there were no roads and the muskeg-turned-mud defeated any wheeled or tracked vehicles.

Intelligence had been generally very good during the Aleutian campaign. CINCPAC had originally received excellent information regarding the disposition and timing of Japanese invasion forces. This was followed by timely aircraft photo intelligence of both Attu and Kiska islands. Even up to the last day prior to the Attu invasion, photo intelligence was interpreted to yield almost the exact number of Japanese troops and gun emplacements. The failure to properly interpret intelligence occurred with regard to the Kiska invasion. For two weeks prior to the August 15, 1943 invasion of Kiska, U.S. Naval gunfire and Air Corp bombing efforts had taken a terrific toll on the island. Yet strike photos revealed that craters had not been filled in and bomb damage had not been repaired. Many analysts believed that the Japanese had left the island. This had, in fact, occurred during the night of July 27th, when Japanese Admiral Kiwase evacuated the remaining 5183 men from Kiska. Marine General Smith advised Admiral Kinkaid that this indeed was a possibility since the Japanese had likewise evacuated 11,000 Japanese

troops from Guadalcanal on February 4th. The commander of the Alaskan scouts requested to put a party ashore on Kiska to accurately determine Japanese strength. This had proved effective elsewhere in the Aleutians. His request was denied. When General Buckner forwarded an intelligence analysis to Admiral Kinkaid detailing daily flak (imagined) encountered by aircrew over Kiska, the invasion was ordered forward. The result was one of the greatest embarrassments of World War II: 34,000 men and 100 ships were used for an unopposed invasion, whose resources could have been better served in other theaters. The greatest loss was the 313 casualties caused by friendly fire, booby traps and the sinking of the USS Abner Read by mine.

Conclusion

The Aleutian campaign yielded useful lessons learned that could have been applied to recent conflicts to avoid the same costly mistakes in men, time and material.

To cite some examples: The Panama invasion and the personal dislike between General Thurman and Ambassador Hinton increased the difficulties presented by post-conflict operations; the Grenada operation demonstrated a failure of previous joint training among the services and how it led to insufficient communication and the uncertain meshing of forces; the Falklands operation showed how ill-prepared Argentinian forces allowed the harsh environment and an insufficient logistics network become decisive factors that worked to British advantage; and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait demonstrated how significant and repeated intelligence reports regarding Iraqi troop movements and possible intentions could have been used, but were ignored by senior American military officials.

Even though the Aleutian campaign took place over 50 years ago, it still merits the

attention of an operational commander. As the first joint operation of the Second World War, there were obviously mistakes made that, through analysis, yield valuable information regarding the proper integration of joint forces to achieve victory in an immature theater covering vast distances in an inhospitable climate. The Americans were victorious in the Aleutians, not because of the proper utilization of joint war fighting principles, but because they could cut the Japanese off from their supply lifeline and deploy a large amount of force and material against their outnumbered forces. As the essay has shown, the failure to achieve unity of effort and mutual support was largely due to personality clashes, an unclear command relationship, insufficient joint training and misapplied joint intelligence and logistics capabilities.

It is regrettable that the Aleutian campaign is truly the "Forgotten War" because as a classic examination of how not to conduct joint warfare, it proves George Santayana's adage, that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

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Appendix

The Aleutian Campaign

Sequence of Events

1942

- May 15th- U.S. Navy cryptanalysts break Japanese code, learning of Midway and Aleutian invasion plans.
- May 21st- CINCPAC names Rear Admiral Theobald as NORPACFOR. Theobald sails for the Aleutians.
- June 3rd- Japanese warplanes attack Dutch Harbor.
- June 7th- Japanese invasion forces occupy Attu and Kiska.
- June 11th- Americans begin bombing operations against Attu and Kiska.
- August 7th- First American naval bombardment of Kiska.
- August 30th- U.S. Army forces occupy Adak.

1943

- January 4th- Rear Admiral Thomas C. Kinkaid replaces Rear Admiral Theobald.
- January 11th- U.S. Army forces occupy Amchitka.
- March 26th- Battle of the Komandorskis.
- May 11th- Americans invade Attu.
- May 30th- Attu secured.
- July 27th- Japanese evacuate Kiska.
- August 15th- Americans occupy Kiska.

Attu Island

